

Khānqāh

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The institution of a residential teaching center for Ṣūfīs seems to have emerged in Iran with the formalization of Ṣūfī activity in the late tenth or eleventh century. Support for these religious institutions by the ruling elites gradually broadened and led to significant patronage in building *khānqāhs* and endowing stipends for the Ṣūfīs living there. *Khānqāhs* developed ritual functions in later periods, serving as centers for devotions such as listening to poetry or music and the performance of the *dhikr* and *samāʿ* ceremonies of specific Ṣūfī orders. Some Ṣūfī leaders were buried in their *khānqāhs*, thus making them into popular pilgrimage sites. The residential function of the *khānqāh* does not seem to be essential, and the name indicates the function performed by a space rather than any inherent physical structure, because the same buildings could shift their usage, for example by becoming schools.

The term is of Persian origin and probably derives from words meaning “a place of residence” (*khāna-gāh*) for Ṣūfīs, although many other etymologies have been suggested (Mīrā, 1990, pp. 55–64). Some scholars see a precedent for the *khānqāh* in Buddhist and Manichean activities in Iran. This institution has numerous regional

manifestations and has undergone a number of transformations in the premodern and modern periods, primarily because of the changing nature of institutional Sufism and its role in society.

Several other terms have a similar connotation. *Zāwiyah*, based on Arabic *zawā*, “to bring together, gather, contract, conceal,” also conveys the idea of withdrawing into a corner, or going into seclusion (Behrens-Abouseif, 1985, p. 116). *Ribāt* is an Arabic term that originally indicated a fortress or outpost for the defense of the faith, associated in Ṣūfī contexts with centers for Ṣūfī striving (*jihād*) against the lower self (*nafs*). Although some sources used the above three terms as equivalents, Fernandes (1988, p. 18) argues on the basis of Mamlūk endowment documents (*waqfiyahs*) that each had a distinct function. In Mamlūk Egypt, *ribāṭs* served as refuges for Ṣūfīs as well as for the needy and homeless of both sexes. *Tekke* (Turkish) or *takīyah* (Arabic and Persian) is the term used for the Ṣūfī institution of the dervish lodge in Turkey and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. It is said to be derived from the Arabic root *w-k-*, which conveys the idea of a chamber in which one rests while being fed.

South Asia.

In the predominantly South Asian Chishtī order an institution for Ṣūfī activity was called *jamāʿat khānah* and was centered on the residence of the *shaykh*. Sections of these Ṣūfī complexes were named according to their particular functions—*samāʿ maḥall* (room for audition) or *langar khāna* (room for the preparation and distribution of food). Today they function predominantly as shrines to deceased saints where pilgrims can receive blessings or cures and make vows.

In contemporary Pakistan, the function of providing instruction to novices through contact with a living master and association with other spiritual aspirants has faded, and the buildings are in many cases converted to residential schools offering a standard *madrasah*

curriculum. The students are young and seem to be there primarily for charity-based education rather than for individual spiritual guidance. One may speculate that this has to do with the decreasing charisma of the Şūfī teachers and the social pressures for young people to pursue education that is somewhat more economically productive than being a full-time disciple.

Turkey.

An article by Klaus Kreiser suggests that classical Şūfī *tekkes* in Turkey were generic, with no particular *tarīqah* affiliation. *Tekkes* often converted their function back and forth to being *madrasahs*, relocated, or switched *tarīqah* affiliation depending on the fortunes of the associated *shaykh* (1992, p. 51). Kreiser found that in 1870 in Istanbul there were 1,826 registered *tekke* residents drawn from various orders, the majority being Naqshbandīs. Many of the centers were very small (three or fewer permanent residents) (p. 52). However, the fact that few persons actually might have lived permanently in a *khānqāh* does not imply that the *shaykh* had only a small following: hundreds of disciples might attend Friday prayers or devotional practices at the center. Although the Turkish republic closed the *tekkes* in 1925, Şūfī activities continued in less public ways and are currently undergoing some revival in Turkey.

Egypt.

In Cairo “the spread of Sufism during the fourteenth century and its integration into popular religious life led to a gradual abandonment of the *khānqāh*'s role as a place for seclusion and retreat. At the same time, mosques and *madrasahs* were opening their doors to Şūfī practices” (Behrens-Abouseif, 1985, p. 81). In the Egyptian context *zāwiyahs* as opposed to *khānqāhs* were characterized as being more open and associated with the popularization of Sufism rather than its elite-supported, formally organized and sanctioned forms. *Khānqāhs* in Cairo were often

linked with non-Egyptian Ṣūfīs who took up residence there and received official patronage. *Zāwiyahs* seem generally to have been built at the bequest of particular patrons, and some became *waqfs* on the death of the patron. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century in Egypt, the term *zāwiyah* referred to a structure built for the *shaykh* of a particular order to serve as a residence for him and a meeting place for his disciples. When the *shaykh* was buried there after his death, the *zāwiyah* would become a shrine. After this period in Egypt institutional Sufism and the *khānqāh* declined; but since popular Sufism flourished, the functions and architectural importance of the *zāwiyah* increased.

In the late Mamlūk period, the separate designation *khānqāh* disappeared as part of a general decline in institutionalized Sufism. The designation *zāwiyah* grew in importance, and buildings called *zāwiyahs*, *tekiyyas* and *ribāṭs* were built by patrons in Ottoman Cairo.

Today in popular Egyptian Sufism, the ritual or performative aspects of Ṣūfī devotions are often performed in mosques. *Zāwiyahs* may be founded by individual *shaykhs* and persist in functioning as hospitality centers for those who travel the circuit of shrine celebrations (*mawlid*s). See [Mawlid](#).

North and East Africa.

In regions of Africa as diverse as Libya, the Sudan, and Somalia, *khānqāh*-like institutions called *zāwiyahs* or *jamā'āt* emerged in the nineteenth century. R. S. O'Fahey (1990) suggests that these Ṣūfī communities established in Africa were a novelty for this part of the Islamic world, arising out of the contemporary movement of reformist Sufism. Noteworthy in this context were the effects of these Ṣūfī institutions in forging loyalties that tended to transcend tribal and social boundaries. For example, in southern Somali society *jamā'āts* are bases for Ṣūfī mediators (*wadaads*) of local clan rivalries. The *wadaads* usually gather around charismatic *shaykhs* in

this region and form self-sufficient agricultural enclaves. In Libya, *Sanūsī zāwiyahs* were an effective form of organization in resisting European encroachment.

Iran.

The role of Sufism and *Ṣūfī* shrine complexes increased in prominence in fourteenth-century Mongol Iran. At this time *Ṣūfī* ritual became institutionalized, and relations of *Ṣūfīs* with the political authorities were important. This link between the state and Sufism can explain some of the vicissitudes of the *Ṣūfī* orders and their institutions in the *Ṣafavid* and *Qājār* periods. The *Qājār* period basically saw an increase in the establishment of *Ni‘matullāhī khānqāhs* when this order was patronized by the state as a balance to the power of the *‘ulamā’*. During recent decades some Persian orders, in particular the *Ni‘matullāhī*, have established *khānqāhs* in a number of cities in America, Europe, and other parts of the world.

See also [Ni‘matullāhīyah](#); [Sufism](#); and [Zāwiyah](#).

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